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SUBJECT: 'YES' VS. 'NO' -- THE FRENCH REFERENDUM DEBATE

Classified By: Minister Counselor for Political Affairs Josiah Rosenblatt for reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) The deepening debate in France over the EU Constitution has highlighted the divisions within the center-right and center-left coalitions that dominate the country's political scene. Overall, to be in favor of the proposed Constitution is seen as supporting business-as-usual -- to favor taking the next, long-planned step in the construction of Europe and to confirm in power the political elite (both left and right) that has been nearly unanimous in its support for Europe for the last quarter century. Overall, to be against the proposed Constitution is seen as objecting to both the workability and direction of the EU. The EU's continued enlargement is seen as making for a more diffuse, less cohesive and effective EU as an international political player -- and one in which France will lose its pre-eminence. For many on the center-left, to vote 'no' is also to vote against President Chirac, expressing dissatisfaction with his and Prime Minister Raffarin's economic and social policies. END SUMMARY.

ULTRA-CONSERVATIVES VS. CONSERVATIVES WITHIN THE CENTER-RIGHT

2. (SBU) The center-right, led by the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party -- and its electorate -- largely favor the proposed Constitution. Latest polls show that among voters who identify themselves as right-of-center, likely 'yes' voters outnumber likely 'no' voters by about 60 percent to 40 percent. The ultra-conservative fringe of the center-right, the traditionalist faction led by Phillippe de Villiers, opposes the proposed Constitution and has centered its 'vote no' campaign on the issue of Turkey's eventual accession to the EU.

3. (SBU) Tellingly, the center right's most popular figure, UMP president and former Finance Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, has been equally firm in his support for the Constitution and in his opposition to Turkey's membership in the EU. Sarkozy's position -- 'yes' to the Constitution, 'no' to Turkey -- is the same as that of Francois Bayrou, leader of the small, centrist Union for French Democracy (UDF) party. The factor that energizes the "the question of Turkey," as the French refer to the issue, is popular fear of unlimited Muslim immigration to France and uneasy coexistence with the 5 million Muslims already in the country. A critical mass of center-right voters seem to have accepted the position of Sarkozy (and Bayrou), and have separated the issue of accepting the proposed Constitution from the issue of whether or not 69 million Turks should, eventually, become citizens of the EU.

RADICALS VS. MODERATES WITHIN THE CENTER-LEFT

4. (SBU) The center-left Socialist Party (PS) -- and its electorate -- is deeply divided. The socialist moderates, led by party National Secretary Francois Hollande and former Finance Minister Dominique Strauss-Kahn, see the proposed Constitution as a necessary, if flawed, platform for pursuing social justice and solidarity ("l'Europe sociale") in ways that will be binding in all EU member states. The moderates' 'vote yes' campaign focuses on this common purpose with socialists in the other member states and on those provisions of the proposed Constitution (charter of social rights, protection of social services, etc.) that are of socialist inspiration. The trend in the polls is that agreement with the arguments of center-left moderates have lost considerable ground among left-leaning voters.

5. (SBU) The 'no' sentiment among center-left voters is driven by apprehension over diminishing job security and social services, compounded by a range of anti-government and anti-elite feelings. The leaders of the 'no' camp on the left -- former Budget Minister Henri Emmanuelli and Senator Jean-Luc Melenchon -- have succeeded in channeling this disquiet over the economic situation and antipathy towards corporate interests, Euro-technocrats and globalization into opposition to the proposed Constitution, specifically, the way -- they allege -- that it establishes unfettered

"ultra-liberal" capitalism in Europe. The intensity of the 'no' versus 'yes' debate among socialist voters stems from the way the 'no' camp has made it a showdown between those faithful to socialist ideals (themselves) and the moderates whom they accuse of selling out.

16. (C) The 'yes' camp on the left counters that both moving forward with a European socialist agenda and normalizing center-right/center-left alternation in power in France requires abandoning the contestatory, to-the-barricades maximalism of 'old left' ideals. Among the socialists' voter base -- many of them union members and government employees in the beleaguered public health and education systems -- the moderates' realism is emotionally unsatisfying. However, the socialist 'yes' camp arguments did win over, with difficulty, 59 percent of the 120,000 active members of the Socialist Party at the time of the party's internal referendum on the proposed Constitution last December. The most recent polls show that over 40 percent of likely voters remain undecided; the bulk of these are found among France's 12 million or so socialist sympathizers. It remains to be seen if the arguments of the 'yes' supporters on the left -- abetted by the intervention of President Chirac -- will again succeed, winning over enough left-of-center voters to tip the scales in favor of 'yes' on referendum day May 29.

LATEST POLL RESULTS

17. (U) An Ifop-Paris Match poll released March 31 shows the 'no' camp holding its lead over the 'yes' camp, 53 percent 'no' to 47 percent 'yes'. This is a slight narrowing -- from 55/45 percent respectively -- of the 'no' lead registered in polls a week before. The March 31 poll also shows that 54 percent of respondents say they have decided how they are going to vote and 43 percent say they remain undecided (3 percent have no reply to question). Among those who say they can still change their mind, the bulk are on the center-left (Socialist Party and Greens sympathizers).

18. (U) In addition, the poll shows that on the far left and far right ends of the political spectrum (Communist party and National Front party sympathizers) the split is 25 percent 'yes' and 75 percent 'no'. Within the center-left and center (Socialist Party and Union for French Democracy party) the split is 55 percent 'yes' and 45 percent 'no'. On the center-right (Union for a Popular Movement party sympathizers) the split is 77 percent 'yes' and 23 percent 'no'. This poll also shows that the proposed Constitution is favored by about three-fifths of old people and young people. Among the thirty-somethings and the middle aged, however, 'no' sentiment prevails by 56 percent to 44 percent. This poll also confirms what has long been known, that industrial workers and service employees at the low end of the wage scale, along with rural folk, tend towards 'no' by a significant three fifths to two fifths. Interestingly, among those polled, 49 percent say the 'yes' will win and 38 percent say the 'no' will win (13 percent have no reply to the question).

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